

THE POLITICS OF PERSECUTION

Middle Eastern Christians
in an Age of Empire



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In the 1948 War, 35 percent of all Christians living in Palestine lost their possessions, their work, their land, and their homes. The decline of the Christian population was quick and striking in the thriving Palestinian cities like New Jerusalem (about 88 percent), Haifa (52 percent) Jaffa (about 73 percent), Ramleh (about 40 percent), and Lydda (approximately 70 percent).³ Almost half of the Palestinian Christian refugees fled to Lebanon. The other half settled in the West Bank and Jordan (7,000 in East Jerusalem, 4,500 in Bethlehem, 5,500 in Ramallah, and 9,000 in Amman and Madaba), thereby increasing the number of Christians in East Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In short, the percentage of Christians in Palestine dropped from around 8 percent to 2.8 percent within just a few months.⁴ If the 1948 displacement had not occurred, the 170,000 Christians living in historical Palestine today would, by now, number nearly 600,000.

The Nakba and the establishment of the State of Israel was a huge blow to the

demography of the Palestinian Christian community and triggered a trend toward a declining demography. Christians in Palestine have never recovered from the effects of the Nakba. Much like the British Mandate, the Israeli authorities prohibited the return of Palestinians to their homes. Christians and Muslims alike thus underwent a forced migration; they were compelled to leave their land and start an indefinite reality as refugees stranded in camps and in the diaspora.

Alas, the depopulation of the land of its Christian inhabitants did not stop there, and many more were expelled in the years following the Nakba as the Israeli administration went on to destroy Christian villages such as Iqrit, Bir'im, and al-Mansura. The tale of Iqrit⁵ illustrates how the newly established State of Israel dealt with the Palestinian Christian community. Iqrit was a